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Former Viet General Claims Hanoi Holds POWS

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WASHINGTON

A former South Vietnamese general Monday told Secretary of State George Shultz the Vietnamese government is holding U.S. prisoners of war to bargain for diplomatic recognition.

"It is common knowledge that the communist government withholds information about the missing and retains a number of POWs as bargaining chips for U.S. diplomatic recognition and aid," said Gen. Nguyen Van La, who leads a group opposing the Hanoi regime.

In a three-page letter to Shultz, Van La asked the United States to help his group oppose Vietnam's communist regime by not granting it diplomatic recognition.

"This letter is not to seek help from the United States, although such help is much needed and welcome," said Van La, who said he was the most senior general of South Vietnam's army at the time of his retirement in 1974.

"We are seeking moral support, however. This moral support can come in the form of the United States refraining from recognizing the Hanoi government as the legitimate government of the whole Vietnam."

Van La said that U.S. recognition of Hanoi "would undercut the legitimacy of the Vietnam resistance and change the status of the anti-communist (forces) from that of freedom fighters ... to that of 'rebels.'"

The letter was distributed during a Capitol Hill press conference in which Van La identified himself as the commander of the "Overseas Volunteer Forces for the Restoration of Vietnam," with headquarters in Capistrano Beach, Calif.

Van La said his group has contact with other resistance groups inside Vietnam and that one of its main assignments is gathering information on 2,500 Americans listed as POWs or missing in action.

"We shall quietly turn over to the proper Department of Defense any information found," Van La told Shultz. "We shall not rest until the last POW is returned and the last MIA accounted for."

The group headed by Van La was founded in 1980 by Vo Dai Ton, a former lieutenant colonel assigned to the military office of Vietnamese President Tran Van Huong until the fall of Saigon in April 1975.

Dai Ton fled to Australia in the summer of 1975 and was captured by Vietnamese forces in November 1981. This past summer, Dai Ton was shown to reporters at a press conference in Hanoi during which he refused to admit Vietnamese charges that he and his group were linked to the CIA.